

This is a draft of a piece that ran in the Experimental Film Coalition Newsletter--I don't have the published version around.

Experimental Documentary
reply to a questionnaire June 88

Chuck Kleinhans

Are experimental and documentary two mutually exclusive categories?

No, of course not, there're lots of films that are both experimental and documentary.

Name some experimental documentaries.

OK, by male filmmakers: The Man With the Movie Camera, Three Songs of Lenin (Dziga Vertov); Rain (Joris Ivens); October (Sergei Eisenstein); A propos de Nice (Jean Vigo); Hour of the Furnaces (Solanas & Gettino); My Son Che, and Return Address: Nicaragua (Fernando Birri); Mr. Hayashi and Valentin de las Sierras (Bruce Baillie); David Holzman's Diary (Jim MacBride); Letter from Siberia (Chris Marker); Land Without Bread (Luis Bunuel); The Doctor John Haney Sessions (Owen Shapiro and Tom Friedman); Stations of the Elevated (Manny Kirscheimer); 79 Springtimes of Ho Chi Minh (Santiago Alvarez); Report (Bruce Conner); On the Bowery (Lionel Rogosin); The Phoenix City Story (Phil Karlson); Labor Day, East Chicago (Tom Palazollo); Cocksucker Blues (Robert Frank), Landscape Suicides (Jim Benning); British Sounds, Pravda, Letter to Jane (Godard and Gorin); Serene Velocity (Ernie Gehr); The Wave (Paul Strand); Wonder Ring (Stan Brakhage); Titicut Follies (Fredrick Wiseman); New York, Near Sleep (Peter Hutton); First Charge of the Machete (Manuel Octavio Gomez).

Those are some examples from films I've been thinking about.

Do you mean those are the best experimental documentaries?

No, not necessarily, but ones worth thinking about. If I was organizing some screenings or teaching, I'd want to show an incredible range of documentary forms, styles, and strategies. The whole definition of documentary changes over time. The Russians considered any dramatic re-enactment of an actual event to be documentary: *Potemkin* was a documentary.

Why do some people think there's a huge difference between experimental and documentary film?

That's a condition of the times. At times of great creative activity, like the start of the New American Cinema, the boundaries between different forms shift and change and seem less important. We live in a generally ungenerous time now: people want to be specialists, to separate themselves from others rather than risking something new, something collaborative. Today, innovation in experimental film has been defined largely in terms of the next step in a formal development which is well defined by experienced professionals. It's like dentistry.

It used to be that people figured, "well, we're all in this together!" and you could have a toleration of socially committed documentary filmmaking and innovative narrative filmmaking and lyrical or abstract or whatever in the same group, at the same screening. Now there's a lot of false purism that goes around: filmmakers who won't watch video, avant gardists who won't watch issue oriented documentary, political activists who won't accept innovative forms in media, programmers who won't show film and video in the same show, etc. People want everything to be precise and there to be lots of rules. Maybe that's a change of consciousness due to AIDS. Maybe it's just that the Reagan Presidency has increased national anal retentiveness.

How do you define experimental documentary?

I define it in terms of distribution and exhibition. Basically, any documentary that can't be shown on PBS or in the art house circuit because its form is too strange, its message too deviant, is experimental. Oh,

you could define it other ways too. Most people would define it in terms of maker's intention: documentaries which are formally organized for the maker's expressive purpose.

Documentaries that vary from the dominant forms, norms, and ideologies are not going to find easy distribution. Experimental films which use the relation of film to reality, the image and sound reproducing potential of film, in a significant way are documentaries, at least in that regard.

What do you think is the best experimental documentary work being done today?

I think video has it all over film in documentary right now. If you're going to shoot a lot, you'll choose video. There's lots of great video documentary today which breaks from the dominant forms of television.

What about your own work?

I've been working in video, most recently trying to distribute a very lyrical, slow moving documentary, POSTCARDS FROM NICARAGUA. I'm interested in trying to find new ways of documenting and translating what I've seen, and experienced, and learned in several trips to Nicaragua. To follow this documentary, people have to change their usual concept of media rhythm. POSTCARDS tries to move differently through space and time than a typical documentary. It's more involved with showing than telling.

Films which are too weird, too revealing, too threatening, for the dominant system are set off in the cosy world of the avant garde where they can be appreciated without threat.

The big story of the Reagan Era is stress and how it is to be dealt with.

tradition of personal docy

women's documentaries

Hurry, Hurry, and Visual Variations on Nuguchi, and Arabesque for Kenneth Anger (Marie Menken); (Maya Deren); Rape (JoAnn Elam); Daughter Rite (Michelle Citron); My Name is Oona, and Trollestenen (sp?) (Gunvor Nelson); Portrait of Jason (Shirley Clarke); *(Sara Halprin); Barbara Hammer; Lives of Performers (Yvonne Rainer);

add video

Kuchar

Ones worth thinking about; ones that I've been thinking about. Styles, and strategies.

In the fifties, some people applied the term to Hollywood fiction films that had a gritty realism in look and theme.

The tradition of personal filmmaking in the avant garde obviously links documentation with an expressive form. As opposed to abstract or graphic films--and which are manipulating reproducing potential of film

So Stan Brakhage's home movies are art, while other people's home movies are kitsch?

Brakhage always films his family so you know there's Big Daddy Stan holding the camera. When Jane films Stan at the end of Window Water Baby Moving, it's clearly a film about Stan, not about Jane. What tends to get attention in the avant garde is when famous male filmmakers take up personal, diary, autobiographical, portrait filmmaking and show how technically sophisticated they are, how sensitive they are, how visionary they are, how many lovers they have.

Actually, I think the most interesting work--formally as well as in terms of content--has been done by women. They often worked in low budget and marginal ways, but they found new visual expressions for emotional and intellectual concerns. It's a tradition that's easily overlooked by men and the artworld in general. Or it's

considered a minor trend. But there's really a rich tradition there. Women's birth films such as Marjorie Keller's *Misconception*, or Dawn Weideman's *A Birthing*, take the genre much further. Women's personal documentary.

Pull My Daisy, *Shadows*, *Empire*--three major works of the Film Culture generation. They're strongly documentary, even if we call the first two fictions and the third experimental.

Think also of *Meditation on Violence Fuses* (Carolee Schneeman), *Name is Oona*, (Gunvor Nelson), *Keltie's Beard* (Barbara Martineau), *Women I Love* (Barbara Hammer); *Lives of Performers* (Yvonne Rainer). And *Marilyn Times Five Nudes* (Curt McDowell); *Trollstenen* (Gunvor Nelson); *Demon Lover Diary* (Joel DeMott); *Misconception*, *Daughters of Chaos* and *The Fallen World* (Marjorie Keller); *Speak Body* and *Striptease* (Kay Armatage); *Reassemblage* (Trinh T. Minh-ha); *Water Sark* (Joyce Weiland); *The Tie That Binds* (Su Friedrich).

You couldn't say they have the same form, or the same theme, or point of view. But they all tell us something about the world, about culture, about trying to represent that world on film.